

CHAPTER 2

THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM: WHERE DO WE STAND AND WHERE ARE WE GOING?

This chapter seeks to portray different perspectives on the nature, evolution and future of the World Social Forum. We invited contributions from three people who have played a significant role in the origins and development of the World Social Forum. Their contributions are timely: the Porto Alegre Manifesto, a platform of proposals launched at the 5th World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2005, sparked a debate that we would like to continue in the Global Civil Society Yearbook. Key issues include the appropriateness of such a manifesto and its implications for the nature of the World Social Forum, including, for example, the discussion about whether it is a space for debate or a campaigning movement.

The manifesto was signed by 19 people, among them Bernard Cassen and Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Chico Whitaker did not sign the manifesto. Unlike Chapter 6, which analyses the social forum phenomenon from an empirical perspective, this chapter offers personal reflections.

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Chico Whitaker

Introduction

Where does the World Social Forum (WSF [URL](#)) process stand today? After the success of the 2005 event, which drew 150,000 participants to Porto Alegre, many of those engaged in organising forums are worried. Where is this process heading? What is the WSF actually intended to achieve? How effective is it in promoting the necessary political changes? Is it running out of steam? Is it not at risk of causing a great deal of frustration – with all the accompanying ill effects – by announcing that ‘Another World Is Possible’ and thus raising expectations that are difficult to meet given the resurgence of wars and terrorism and the increasingly visible likelihood of irreversible ecological disasters?

Indeed, it is becoming increasingly necessary and urgent to analyse the Forum itself in greater depth. For that very reason, at its meeting in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in late March 2005, the WSF International Council decided to set aside a day and a half at its June 2005 meeting in Barcelona to consider all that was happening in the world today, to assess the ground gained or lost towards the ‘other possible world’ and to examine in depth the Forum’s role in that overall context.

Some thoughts on the World Social Forum itself

A collective effort to think about the role and the nature of the Forum began in October 2002, when an email discussion list titled ‘WSF itself’ was formed. This was proposed by Brazilian and French participants who, after the success of the second Forum, foresaw the likelihood of growth and felt the need to clarify the meaning of the whole endeavour. At the 2003 Forum, that discussion list gave rise to a workshop on proposed innovations in the form and principles underlying its organisation. In 2004, at the Mumbai WSF, two significant events took place: a seminar on the subject ‘Forum: open space?’ and a plenary on the future of the WSF. Mumbai also saw the release of an anthology of essays on the World Social Forum as a challenge to the Empires (Sen et al 2004). Also in 2005, a number of activities addressed this issue from various perspectives and at

least two books discussing the Forum were published (Santos 2004; Whitaker 2005).

However, underlying thinking and discussions about the nature of the Forum and its position in the array of forces present in the world today there linger thought-provoking questions stemming from an assertion that shapes way the Forums are organised: in order for the struggle against triumphalist turn-of-the-century neo-liberalism to be effective, it must go beyond the paradigms of political action that prevailed throughout the twentieth century. That really is a bold assertion. Is such a paradigm change really necessary? If so, is the present method of organising the Forums the best way to bring about that change?

Horizontal networked organisation

The method adopted to date is indeed designed to permit both Forum organisers and participants to experiment practically with a new way of organising and acting politically. From the outset, the organisers of Forums have referred to themselves as ‘facilitators’, never as ‘coordinators’, far less as ‘leaders’. Such vocabulary is extremely important because it reflects the pursuit of a new political culture marked by horizontal relations among actors, in place of the vertical ones that have predominated to date both in capitalist authoritarianism and Western bureaucratic culture and in the actions of their left-wing adversaries.

The argument is that such horizontal relations, with actors organised into networks, are actually much more efficient than vertical and pyramidal relations, as they make it possible to build a collective power, sharing responsibility and therefore becoming stronger. Networks function on the logic that action is taken not because someone issues an order or directive but because people believe it is necessary and take it upon themselves as active subjects. In any case, in pyramidal organisations directives do not always filter down, and managers do not always know what is happening among

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those they manage, which tends to set up a barrier between them. In addition, as power is concentrated at different levels within the pyramid, struggles emerge for control of that power which, instead of uniting those involved, divide and so weaken them.

In fact, experimentation of this kind – which is essentially participatory in nature – is not new. It reinstates the teachings of a tradition of social struggle worldwide against authoritarianism of various kinds, starting with the mobilisations of 1968. In the decades that followed, networks were proposed and consolidated as a different organisational structure in many political undertakings that innovated ways of waging political struggles. For instance, some invented a collegiate structure of direction. The landmark event in this process took place at the end of the twentieth century during the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) conference in Seattle – and thus well before the first World Social Forum. These protests were of such proportions and so effective in blocking the anti-democratic measures planned for the occasion by the WTO that they surprised even those who – in their enormous diversity of immediate aims – had thrown themselves into the effort.

The Forum's Charter of Principles

Immediately following the success of the first Forum, its organisers drafted a Charter of Principles (WSF 2001; see also Box 6.1), explicitly adopting horizontal relationships. Believing that these relationships were the key to the success of the first Forum, the organisers wanted to ensure that such experimentation would continue and be extended to other events held at the world or the regional level. The charter embodies a set of guidelines completely at variance with current political practices, such as not drawing up final documents at the forums, guaranteeing that participants would be completely at liberty to organise their own activities at these events¹, pledging that the organisers would not direct such activities or any collaboration among them, and not designating spokespeople or representatives of the Forum.

The basic conception of the Forum, as expressed in the charter, is that it is an open space designed to facilitate an interchange of concrete experiences and an ongoing process of increasing links among participants. With this in mind, the organisers included in the charter certain rules – here they really are rules and not the usual empty rhetoric – such as respect for diversity and the pledge to seek effective democracy in

both the preparation and the functioning of the events, with the intention of surmounting the barriers and prejudices that today divide the various types of organisations and sectors that believe that 'Another World Is Possible'. Respecting diversity is in fact a core principle of the WSF, and not only in relation to the organisation of events. It is grounded in the conviction that it is one of the fundamental characteristics of the other world – or, as we say, of the 'other possible worlds' – that we intend to build.

Then, after the third World Social Forum, the charter leveraged another strikingly effective episode in worldwide mobilisation, based on the same logic of networked organisation that had proved so successful at Seattle. On 15 February 2003, protests brought 15 million people onto the streets, in a great number of countries, to demonstrate for peace and against the invasion of Iraq. The proposal to hold these demonstrations was presented and discussed during the Forums in November 2002 (in Florence, the first European Social Forum) and January 2003 (the WSF in Porto Alegre). Under its Charter of Principles, however, the Forum is not an organisation but a 'space'; it has no leaders and cannot call for demonstrations from the top down. The 15 February protests were thus convened by the multiple networks that participated in the Forum or that then started working together, drawing freely – as had happened at Seattle – on an extremely powerful tool for horizontal communication, namely, the internet. The calls that went out for the 2003 demonstrations far exceeded whatever ability the Forum itself may have had to mobilise for action. However, it probably was decisive to the process that the Forum made an open meeting space available, under the terms of its charter, for proposals to be presented and discussed, and for the planning and coordination necessary to carry them out.

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the success of these demonstrations, some would have preferred to mobilise through a call from the Forum as a way of introducing and reinforcing the forums as a new political actor, with its own initiatives. This points to an important, and perhaps the main, question about the nature of the Forum that is continuously debated: is it a space

¹ This principle, combined with the priority that came to be given to the activities planned by participants, meant that, from one Forum to the next, such activities grew in number, while the number of activities planned by the organisers decreased. Indeed, in 2005, the Forum was completely self-managed.

or a movement? How we answer this question will determine the organisation and process of the forums, as well as their future. I have discussed previously, in an article that appears in several publications², why the 'space' conception is preferable to that of a movement, and how some were trying to imbue the Forum with the characteristics of a movement.

How does a space differ from a movement?³

A movement and a space are completely different things. Without Manichaeistic simplifications, we can't be both things. One doesn't exclude the other, which means they can coexist. They are also not opposites, which means that they do not neutralise each other, and can even be additive. But you can't be both things at the same time, not even be a part of each – this would cause prejudice to one and to the other. A movement and a space can have the same general objectives, but each does so in its own way, aiming for specific objectives.

A movement assembles people. Its militants, like the militants of a party, decide to organise themselves to accomplish certain aims collectively. Its formation and existence require that, to attain these objectives, strategies must be defined, action programmes formulated and responsibilities distributed among the movement's members, including that concerning the direction of the movement. Whoever assumes this function will lead the militants of the movement, getting each of them – with authoritarian or democratic methods, according to the choice made by the founders – to perform a part of the collective action. A movement's structure is necessarily pyramidal, even when the internal processes for reaching decisions and choosing decision makers at the different levels are very democratic. But its effectiveness depends on how explicit and precise its specific objectives are, and thus on how delimited they are in time and place.

A space, by contrast, has no leaders. It is just a place, basically horizontal, like the earth's surface, although undulating. Like a square, it has no owner – if the square has an owner other than those who use it, it becomes a private territory. Squares are generally open spaces that can be visited by all those with any kind of interest in using them. They have no other function than the function of squares, offering a specific kind of service to those who frequent them. The longer they last as squares, the better for those who make use of them to achieve their respective aims.

Even when a square contains trees and small hills, it is a socially horizontal space. Whoever climbs the trees or the hills cannot aspire, from high up, to command, either entirely or partially, those who are in the square. The least that can happen to climbers is to be considered ridiculous by the others in the square. If they become too insistent and troublesome, speaking for nobody, the visitors leave the square – or even come back with 'public authorities' empowered to stop them, and return peace and tranquillity to the public square.

Like a square, the Forum is an open space, as specified in the Charter of Principles. But unlike a public square it is not a neutral space. The Forum opens up from time to time in different parts of the world with one key objective: to allow as many people, organisations and movements as possible that oppose neo-liberalism to get together freely, to listen to each other, to learn from the experiences and struggles of others, to discuss proposals for action and to become linked to new networks and organisations that aim to challenge the present process of globalisation dominated by large international corporations and financial interests. Thus, it is a space created to serve the common aim of all those who converge on the Forum, and it functions horizontally like a public square, without leaders or pyramids of power. All those who come to the Forum accept this, and participants are therefore required to agree to abide by the Charter of Principles.

In fact, the Forum works as an 'ideas factory' or an incubator, whereby it is hoped that many new initiatives will emerge for constructing another world, one that we all consider possible, necessary and urgent. It is thus to be expected that a plethora of movements will emerge – large or small, combative or quiescent – each with its own aims and strategies in the same struggle, the struggle the square stands for. Another advantage of the 'Forum-space', or a 'square with no owner', is that it creates a feeling of mutual responsibility more readily than a movement.

² See n 3.

³ The paragraphs of this section are taken from Whitaker (2004). This article (originally published in 2003 under the title 'Notes for the Debate on the World Social Forum') is available in three languages on the Forum website (www.forumsocialmundial.org.br). It has been published in French on the ATTAC movement website (www.france.attac.org), in Spanish by Revista de Fomento Social (Cordoba, Spain), in English in Sen et al (2004), and in German. It should also soon be published in Italian by the organisation Transform.

The slow pace of cultural change

This conception of the Forum as a space, not a movement, is based on the assumption that it is not the Forum that can change the world but the social movements and organisations engaged in that struggle.

But the new avenues the Forum is designed to open up to become effective in the struggle to surpass neo-liberalism raise two related problems. First, paradigm change, like all cultural change, is necessarily slow, especially in view of the fact that throughout the twentieth century, the Left was shaped and trained according to paradigms deriving from the need for vanguards to conduct the struggle – exactly what is being called into question at the Forum. Second, new paradigms require that countless practices, concepts and values be revised, along with the very concepts of democracy and representation. To complicate things still further, they also entail changes within ourselves, in our personal behaviour and attitudes. It may thus be a long time before the effects of this whole process can be seen in terms of concrete political results.

That difficulty is compounded by our anguish about the intensity and speed with which the world situation is deteriorating, which demands urgent action. Not to mention that with every passing day, more and more people die for lack of food, medicines or basic sanitation, while the incessant quest for profit at any price continues to dominate economic activities in countries rich and poor. The dialectic of action and reaction set up by the present government of the United States in its war on terrorism is, in turn, driving insecurity worldwide. To make the situation even more serious, the same government – as if its threatened ‘preventive wars’ were not enough – is ringing China with military bases, signalling in that way the new enemy it intends to confront to maintain US hegemony. In addition, accepted and completely feasible measures to address the ecological risks facing humankind are being adopted at an extremely slow rate, and social irresponsibility on the part of business and government continues to prevail over efforts to control the harmful environmental effects of many systems of economic production and activity. In short, the prospects we face are little short of terrifying.

How then can the gradual, bottom-up reconstruction of paradigms of political action be effective? Why reject the action of mainstream powerful political forces or even charismatic leaders that could lead humankind towards other horizons?

This debate heightens existing tensions among the Forum’s participants and organisers. Shaped as we have been by theories and practices based on vertical conceptions of the exercise of power, of militant disciplines, of politics as the struggle for hegemony, we do not always manage to divest ourselves of them – ‘to learn to unlearn’ (Whitaker 2005) – or to go on to adopt the proposals for horizontal, non-directive freedom that is the shared experience of the Forum. Realising the Forum’s power to mobilise, many are unable to resist the temptation to turn it as quickly as possible into an extremely powerful new instrument, a kind of ‘movement of movements’, finally capable of confronting and overthrowing the capitalist monster – and not without entertaining the idea of putting themselves forward to lead it.

But, as I have indicated before, if the Forum does become a ‘movement of movements’, none of these movements would be in a position to open up this space and marshal all the others to accept its invitation without conditions. Meeting with others would be restricted by the need to build another structure to unify – with all the rules necessary to make that possible – within which competition would again arise, and with it division, as a result of the fight to win space, to set directions, and to define the objectives of the new movement.

The saviours

One very concrete example of the temptation to turn the WSF into a movement was an initiative launched at the 2005 Forum by a group of personalities, among them two Nobel laureates. As intellectuals enjoying worldwide recognition, they publicised a manifesto in which they presented 12 themes of the struggle that, in their opinion, all the Forum’s participants could agree on: the ‘Porto Alegre Consensus’, in contrast to the ‘Washington Consensus’ (see Box 2.1). In practice, it amounted to a new ‘right thinking’, mimicking the ‘one truth’ of those who command imperial domination. They successfully invited much of the international press present at Porto Alegre to the launch of the manifesto, which was, however, presented with the proviso that it was not a ‘final document’ of the Forum: otherwise it would have run counter to the Charter of Principles. Nonetheless, the intention to draw up a conclusive, consensual synthesis, the stature of its signatories and the solemnity with which it was presented necessarily left a certain ambiguity in the air.

Of course, the manifesto did not have the effect that its sponsors may have desired. It did not become a single banner hoisted collectively by the Forum's 150,000 participants. Very few of them – besides the journalists – attended the launch, which was held outside the Forum territory, in the press room of the most important hotel in town. Most participants found out about the manifesto the following day in the newspapers. As they had not been even remotely consulted on the content of the 12 items, there was no lack of criticism of their incompleteness and of the formulation and presentation of the manifesto as a top-down initiative, calling into question the very nature of the WSF.

When questioned by journalists about the nature of this initiative, the Forum's organisers had no choice but to point out that it was simply one of the 353 proposals for action presented at the Forum. They took the opportunity to emphasise that the Forum's Charter of Principles ruled out any 'final' document, which would necessarily be so reductionist and impoverished as to end up winning active support from no one; rather, instead of any single such document, hundreds or thousands of final documents should emerge, one from each activity carried out at the Forum, and each of them fully supported by those who signed it.

Actually, using the freedom of initiative that is assured to all its participants, the manifesto continued, within the Forum itself, the tradition of the great leaders that mobilise the masses. The initiative, or the 'manifesto', like other attempts to marshal the strength of the Forum for specific ends⁴, reveals the challenges we have to overcome to change current political behaviour – the Forum being, in fact, a school of new practices.

Participation by political parties

Another area where the provisions of the Charter of Principles are being frequently called into question relates to political parties: the charter prohibits them from engaging in activities at the Forums in the way that other civil society movements and organisations do, and from participating in organising the Forums. A similar prohibition on governments and 'military' organisations is more easily accepted, since the Forum defines itself as a civil society space, independent of governments, and its participants completely reject violence as a method of political action. The prohibition on political parties, which have traditionally been considered the only route to participation in political

action, is questioned repeatedly. The purpose of this prohibition was to prevent the Forum being penetrated by inter-party strife, which derives from the goal, proper to political parties, of gaining political power. It was believed that parties would all, quite naturally, compete to 'control' the Forums as a new tool for mobilising support, and seek to make them political party instruments.

The hope is that no one will seek to turn the Forum space into an instrument for political party aims

Of course, people who are members of political parties have every right to take part in the Forums, individually or through whatever other organisations they may belong to. It would not be practical to identify and prevent members of political parties from participating; indeed, many of the Forum's organisers are affiliated to political parties. The hope is that no one will seek to turn the Forum space into an instrument for party political aims. As for the parties themselves, it is hoped they will take the opportunity – while resisting the temptation to win converts – to listen to what is proposed at the Forums. Later, at their own meetings, they will be able to discuss the ideas garnered in this way, decide whether or not to incorporate them into their own programmes and even associate with or collaborate in activities in the struggle proposed by Forum participants. Without a doubt, this would help them perform their own role – which is different from that of civil society as such – and at the same time rebuild their links with the grass roots.

The grass roots are indeed becoming more remote from political parties, and at the Forums they find a place to engage in political activities that are broader than purely party politics. In fact, it is much more in parties' interest to maintain the Forum as it is, with its independence from governments and parties, instead of absorbing it into their own natural contradictions, thus finally destroying it.

⁴ *The presence of President Lula of Brazil and President Chavez of Venezuela at the 2005 Forum could be seen as one of these attempts, taking the form of reciprocal manipulation: of the presidents by the organisations, which by their own initiative arranged for them to be present, and of those organisations by the presidents, who took advantage of the opportunity for visibility that the Forum offered them. It remains to be seen whether the Forum gained or lost from those initiatives.*

A more flexible Charter of Principles?

Another question that arises repeatedly among the Forum's organisers and participants is this: should the Forum's initiators and the supporters of the Forum-space concept adopt such an unyielding stance and not permit any move towards a more flexible Charter of Principles? The answer is not easy, given the logic and coherence of the principles. Where should there be greater flexibility?

In practice, some of the groups that organise the Forums do treat the charter more flexibly, without much concern for the consequences. Only the world forums held so far have strictly abided by the Charter of Principles; the same cannot be said of all the regional, national or local forums. There are cases, for example, of forums that have ended with final documents, been presented as organisations, and had spokespeople or coordinators. Others are not really 'open spaces' but rather events taken over by particular political forces. Others are organised from the top down only, as if they were seminars. One of the most flagrant cases of breach of the charter had to do precisely with party and government participation. According to the reports of participants, the Socialist Workers' Party and Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London, played central roles in the organisation of the European Social Forum held in London in October 2004.

Denouncing such breaches does not always persuade the perpetrators to change their behaviour because they may not fully understand the rationale behind the Charter of Principles. For that very reason, there must be wide-ranging and in-depth discussion about the nature of the Forum so that it does not self-destruct – that was the thinking behind the workshop held at the 2003 Forum, inspired by the WSF discussion list itself.

In order to understand the logic of the Charter of Principles, it is useful to situate the Forum in recent history. Its characteristics and principles are rooted in the moment when it came into being. This was marked by a build-up of frustrations and disappointments with the kind of political action hitherto undertaken until then to confront an economic and political system that had brought humankind to the difficulties it faces today. For those who initiated the Forum and those who joined them at that time, there was nothing to suggest that good results would come from continuing with the old methods, practices and strategies of the century that had just ended. Why then continue down that path?

The Forum proposed trying new avenues, which

today are proving more worthwhile. One of the initial motivations was precisely that the former type of mobilisation, limited to protests pure and simple, which had multiplied after Seattle, had reached a stalemate and participants were already showing signs of exhaustion. When the Forum was proposed as a counterpoint to the thinking of Davos, it was insisted that it should table proposals of its own. It had to combine mobilisation with proposals and proposals with mobilisation.

For that very reason, two types of concern arose as the process developed, and the methodology employed in organising the Forums made every effort to deal with them: the need to encourage the formulation of more new initiatives to effect change in the world and the need to get the participating organisations to collaborate at the global level, before, during and after the Forums, in order to strengthen their actions. It was for this reason that a Mural of Proposals for Action was created during the 2005 Forum. It was to be the centrepiece of the final closing event, where all the participants would come together in all their diversity of actions and strategies and their overall unity of final aims. Because of organisational shortcomings, this did not happen. However, the mural remained as the product of debates and collaborations that had occurred during the Forum, and its 353 proposals were posted on the Forum's website, available to both participants and non-participants, forming the basis for further collaboration.

The 'Map of Action Towards Building a New World'

Building on the mural, which was designed to make everyone's proposals visible and to facilitate meshing and collaboration among them with a view to their implementation, a further proposal to serve the Forum as a whole was presented in the Utrecht meeting of the International Council. This was to draw up a 'Map of Action Towards Building a New World'.

The purpose of this map was to provide participating organisations with a special programme on the internet, a kind of permanent Mural of Proposals, where initiatives and information on action in progress could be added continually. Using this programme, interested parties could organise groups to discuss or act on the subjects and proposals that concerned them; they could contact other groups and invite them to consider issues or proposals in greater depth, to hold encounters and meetings, and to organise demon-

strations or other kinds of concrete action.

The system would function independently of the Forum events, but would be interconnected with them because the Forums would figure as special opportunities for in-person encounters and for furthering understanding and action, and thus would foster quality leaps in the effectiveness of any action proposed. Set free of the events themselves, the World Social Forum process would advance much more quickly in building an ever larger number of local, national, regional and world networks, thus empowering global civil society to achieve concrete objectives in changing the world.

...new types of relationship, which are more cooperative than competitive, are being constructed

Such an instrument could also work to the benefit of the approach adopted in the WSF International Council's decision to make polycentric the 2006 World Social Forum. Some events will parallel Davos, and others will follow in various regions of the world, all resting on the same participatory approach, characteristic of the process as a whole. The challenge now is to ensure coordination and articulation among them all, so that the whole is not fragmented but rather advances with increasing unity towards the World Social Forum to be held in Africa in 2007.

'Old world' versus 'new world'

Among the various ways of seeing the Forum, supporters of the 'open space' proposal see the tensions indicated above as a confrontation between what they call 'old world' and 'new world' practices. In fact, these tensions are present throughout the meetings, proposals and decisions about the organisational arrangements of the Forum process, from the local to the world level, however much their members declare and believe they are building a 'new world'. Nonetheless, it can be said with optimism that new types of relationship, which are more cooperative than competitive, are being constructed among the individuals and organisations in the Forum's various set-ups; and now, as we head towards the polycentric Forum of 2006, these advances are visible. The conception of the Forum as a movement reappears regularly in proposals and practices, but without doubt, it is the Forum as an open space, along with the other provisions of the charter, that is asserting

itself increasingly.

This is shown by the remarks of some North American participants drafted after the 2005 Forum (Foltz, Moodiliar and Pramas 2005):

The Social Forum should not be seen as the answer to the challenges of our time; it should be seen as a valuable part of the answer(s) with a very distinctive contribution. Other sites for action, for campaigning, for taking decisions are necessary for the global progressive movement; the Social Forum is an important space for incubating these; those who want action (the authors included) should get on with it and organize those actions, making as best use of the Forum as possible!

Whether or not the Forum will continue as a process in the way it has been to date depends on the orientation adopted by its organisers. In fact, we face a dual challenge. The first is not necessarily easy: to ensure that, in the events that are held and the new instruments that are created, the Forum is not swallowed up by the errors of the past that led to its emergence, and that it can continue its endeavours towards the new world that is to be built. The second is as difficult as it is urgent: to expand and entrench this process all over the planet, as quickly as possible. This expansion does not seek to assert the positions of one or another political force, but is designed to make more and more people and organisations join in the hope that the Forum holds out, and participate in the change-making initiatives that are being proposed.

The intention is that increasing numbers of citizens around the world exercise actively and in solidarity – through networks – the enormous power at their disposal as workers and as consumers, and thus contribute to changing the world. At the same time, the expectation is that, as voters, they will elect and increasingly monitor governments to ensure that they defend and promote the interests of people and not capital, in a real commitment to peace, development and social justice.

In confronting the hegemony of top-down political action dependent on enlightened leaders, the Forum can play a decisive role in preventing the defeat of humanisation in the world. If it retreats within the borders of the 'old world', it will certainly disappear. In that case, we will be left watching the dream fade. The right moment will not yet have arrived to change paradigms.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos

Introduction

In order to understand the debates that take place within the World Social Forum (WSF), it is necessary to analyse the ways in which, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, utopian thinking interacts with political activism. In my conception, 'utopia' means exploring new modes of human possibility and styles of will, and using the imagination to confront the apparent inevitability of whatever exists with something radically better that is worth fighting for, and to which humankind is fully entitled (see Santos 1995: 479). The conceptions of and aspirations to a better life and society, ever present in human history, vary in their form and content over time and space. They express the tendencies and latencies of a given epoch and a given society. They constitute an anticipatory consciousness that manifests itself by enlarging the signs or traces of emerging realities.

The hegemonic conception of our age is that of linear time (the idea of progress) that presents itself as a post-linear time-space (the idea of globalisation). Whatever is currently dominant in social and political terms is infinitely expansive, thereby encompassing all future possibilities. The total control over the current state of affairs is deemed to be possible by means of extremely efficient powers and knowledges. Herein lies the radical denial of alternatives to present-day reality. This is the context underlying the utopian dimension of the WSF, which consists of asserting the existence of alternatives to neoliberal globalisation. The specificity of this utopian content, when compared with that of other utopias prevailing at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, thus becomes clear: rather than choosing from different alternatives, as happened in the past, it simply claims the possibility of alternatives, that is, the possibility of counter-hegemonic forms of globalisation. Hence the open nature, vague if you will, of the utopian dimension of the WSF. In a context of radical denial of alternatives, it is more important to affirm the possibility of alternatives than to define them. In other words, the utopia of the WSF asserts itself more as a negative (the

definition of what it critiques) than as a positive (the definition of that to which it aspires).

The specificity of the utopian dimension of the WSF has one more explanation. It aims to break with the tradition of the utopias of Western modernity, many of which turned into radical denials of alternatives: beginning by asserting utopian alternatives, they ended up denying alternatives under the excuse that the realisation of utopia was under way. The openness of the utopian dimension of the WSF corresponds to the latter's attempt to escape this perversion. For the WSF, both the form of the affirmation of alternatives and the content of the alternatives are plural. The affirmation of alternatives goes hand in hand with the affirmation that there are alternatives to the alternatives. The other possible world is a utopian aspiration that comprises several possible worlds. The other possible world may be many things, but never a world with no alternative.

The utopia of the WSF is a radically democratic utopia. This utopian design – grounded on the denial of the present rather than the definition of the future focused on the processes of intercourse among the movements rather than providing an assessment of the movements' political content – is the major cohesive force of the WSF. It helps to maximise what unites and to minimise what divides, to celebrate intercourse rather than to dispute power, to be a strong presence rather than an agenda. This utopian design, which is also an ethical design, privileges the ethical discourse, quite evident in the WSF's Charter of Principles, aimed at gathering consensus beyond the ideological and political cleavages among the movements and organisations that compose it. The movements and organisations bracket the cleavages that divide them as much as is necessary to affirm the possibility of a counter-hegemonic globalisation.

The nature of this utopia has been the most adequate for the initial objective of the WSF: to affirm the existence of a counter-hegemonic globalisation. Far from being vague, it is as concrete as it is adequate for this phase of the construction of a counter-hegemonic globalisation. It remains to be seen whether the nature of this utopia

is the most adequate one to guide the next steps. Once counter-hegemonic globalisation is consolidated, and hence the idea that another world is possible is made credible, will it be possible to fulfil this idea with the same level of radical democracy that helped formulate it?

To answer this question, the articulation between the WSF's utopian dimension and the political activism it has been giving rise to must be brought into the picture.

Utopia meets politics

The newness of the WSF's utopian dimension in Left thinking in Western capitalist modernity can only be problematic as it translates into strategic planning and political action. These are marked by the historical trajectory of the political Left throughout the twentieth century. The translation of utopia into politics is not, in this case, merely the translation of the long range into the medium and short range. It is also the translation of the new into the old. This means that divergences about concrete political options are often mixed up with divergences about the codes and languages of political options.

It should be stressed, however, that the novelty of the utopia has managed so far to overcome the emergence of severe political divergences. At this juncture, it is adequate to distinguish between high-intensity cleavages and low-intensity cleavages. The former are the cleavages where radical discursive differences translate into some form of factionalism, be it collective splits and abandonment of the political organisation or organised tendencies inside the organisation; the latter, by contrast, are those in which the discursive differences, no matter how radical, do not preclude continued participation in the organisation. So far, the divergences or cleavages within the WSF have been of the low-intensity kind. Contrary to what happened in the thinking and practice of the Left in Western capitalist modernity throughout the twentieth century, the WSF managed to create a style and an atmosphere of inclusion of and respect for divergences that made it very difficult for the different political factions to exclude themselves from the start with the excuse that they were being excluded. The WSF's 'minimalist' programme, stated in its Charter of Principles, contributed decisively to this effect: emphatic assertion of respect for diversity; access denied only to movements or groups that advocate political violence; no voting or deliberations at the Forum as such; no representative entity to speak for the Forum. It is almost

like a tabula rasa where all forms of struggle against neoliberalism and for a more just society may have their place. Confronted with such openness, those who choose to exclude themselves find it difficult to define what exactly they are excluding themselves from.

All this has contributed to making the WSF's power of attraction greater than its capacity to repel. Even the movements that are most severely critical of the WSF, such as the anarchists or the revolutionary Left political parties, have not been absent. There is definitely something new in the air, something that is chaotic, messy, ambiguous, and indefinite enough to deserve the benefit of the doubt. For all these reasons, the desire to highlight what the movements and organisations have in common has prevailed over the desire to underscore what separates them. The manifestation of tensions or cleavages has been relatively tenuous and, above all, has not resulted in mutual exclusions. It remains to be seen for how long this will to convergence and this chaotic sharing of differences will last.

...is it possible to link up the different peoples of the WSF as an embryonic form of a counter-hegemonic civil society?

This does not mean that there are no strong disagreements. There are, and they have become louder and louder in recent years. This raises several issues. First of all, is it possible to link up the different peoples of the WSF as an embryonic form of a counter-hegemonic civil society? Second, how to transform the areas of widely shared consensuses into calls for collective action? Third, how better to explore the implications of both the agreements and the disagreements? For instance, should disagreements be the object of specific discussions in the WSF? Fourth, how to conceive of the relationship between participants and organisers (the International Council, (IC), and the International Secretariat, (IS)? Fifth, how to articulate such diversity with the common core upon which the WSF builds its identity and eventually develops its capacity to act?

These questions lurk behind most formulations of most cleavages manifested inside the WSF. Elsewhere, I have identified the following main strategic cleavages: reform or revolution; socialism or social emancipation; the state as enemy or as ally (potentially, at least); priority to be given to national or to global struggles;

direct action or institutional action or relations between them; priority to be given to the principle of equality or to the principle of respect for difference; the WSF as a space or as a movement (Santos 2004). In this contribution, I will focus on the last of these. But before doing so, I would like to stress that, except for the last one in the above list, the cleavages are not specific to the WSF. They in fact belong to the historical legacy of the social forces that for the past 200 years have struggled against the status quo for a better society. The specificity of the WSF resides in the fact that the different cleavages are important in different ways for the different movements and organisations, and none of them is present in the practices or discourses of all the movements and organisations. When cleavages are acknowledged, the different movements and organisations distribute themselves among them in a non-linear way. Movements that oppose one another in a given cleavage may well be on the same side in another cleavage. Thus, the different strategic alliances or common actions featured by each movement tend to have different partners. But, on the whole, all the movements and organisations have room for action and discourse in which to agree with all the other movements or organisations, whatever the cleavages among them. In this way, the accumulation and strengthening of divergences that could result from the alignment of the movements in multiple cleavages are precluded. The cleavages end up neutralising or disempowering one another. At the same time as they tend towards factionalism, they liberate the potential for consensus. Herein has lain, in the last instance, the WSF's aggregating power.

The WSF as a space or as a movement

The cleavage over whether the WSF should be a space or a movement occurs at a different level from the others. Rather than the political differences between movements and NGOs inside the WSF, it concerns their differences about the political nature of the WSF itself. Indeed, this cleavage runs through all the others, since differences about strategic goals and forms of action often boil down to differences about the role of the WSF in those goals and actions.

This cleavage has been present from the outset. It led, for instance, to some scarcely known clashes within the organising committee of the first edition of the WSF. But it was within and after the third WSF that this cleavage gained notoriety and involved a large

number of participants. The sheer size of the WSF 2003 and the organisational problems it raised prompted the discussion about the future of the WSF. It soon became clear to the broader public of the WSF that the discussion was not about organisational issues but rather about the political role and nature of the WSF. The cleavages in this debate deepened after the fourth (2004, Mumbai) and the fifth (2005, Porto Alegre) editions of the WSF.

In order to be enabling, diversity must have an organisational and political core capable of deciding and carrying out collective actions in the name of the WSF

Two extreme positions can be identified in this debate, and between them a whole range of intermediate positions. On one side is the conception of the WSF as a 'movement of movements'. This conception has been expounded almost from the very beginning by influential members of the global network of social movements, whose general assembly meets in parallel with the WSF. The idea behind this conception is that, unless the WSF becomes a political actor in its own right, it will soon be discredited as a talking shop, and the anti-capitalist energy that it has generated will be wasted. If left alone, the celebration of diversity, however praiseworthy, will have a paralysing effect, and become vulnerable to capitalist domination. In order to be enabling, diversity must have an organisational and political core capable of deciding and carrying out collective actions in the name of the WSF. Such decisions should be stated in a final declaration of each edition of the WSF. With this in mind, the Charter of Principles must be revised. Horizontal organisation based on consensus should be replaced by (or at least articulated with) a democratic command authorised to act in the name of the WSF.

On the other side, there is the conception of the WSF as a space, a meeting ground in which no one can be or feel excluded. This does not mean that the WSF is a neutral space. Its objective is to allow the largest possible number of people, organisations and movements opposing neoliberalism to get together freely. Once together, they can listen to each other, learn from the experience and struggles of others, discuss proposals for action, and become linked in new net-

works and organisations without being interfered with by leaders, commands or programmes. The extreme version of this conception has been expounded by Chico Whitaker, one of the founders of the WSF and an influential member of the IS and the IC. He argues in this chapter that the nature of the WSF as an open space (he uses the metaphor of the public square) based on the power of free horizontal articulation should be preserved at all cost. After counterposing the organisational structure of a space and of a movement, he lashes out against the 'so-called social movements' that want to transform the WSF into a movement:

(T)hose who want to transform it (the WSF) into a movement will end up, if they succeed, by working against our common cause, whether they are aware or not of what they are doing, whether they are movements or political parties, and however important, strategically urgent and legitimate their objectives might be. They will be effectively acting against themselves and against all of us. They will be hindering and suffocating its own source of life – stemming from those articulations and initiatives born in the Forum – or at least destroying an enormous instrument that is available for them to expand and to enlarge their presence in the struggle we are all engaged in. (Whitaker 2003)

The second conception is by far the dominant one in the IS and is also prevalent in the IC, but it is rarely defended in terms of Whitaker's extreme version¹. For instance, Candido Grzybowski, another founder of the WSF whose NGO, Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis (IBASE), is a very influential member of the IS, wrote in the first issue of the journal of the Forum, *Terraviva* (2003):

To try to eliminate contradictions at the core of the WSF and turn it into a more homogeneous space and process for confronting neoliberalism is the aim of certain forces, inspired by the classic political partisanship of the left. I would even say that this struggle within the Forum is legitimate and deserves respect, given its visions and values. But it destroys innovation of the WSF, what it possesses in terms of potential to feed a broad and diverse movement of the global citizenry in building another world.

Another intermediate position in this cleavage, but closer to the movement position, has been adopted by Teivo Teivainen (2004), member of the IC, representing the National Institute for Global Democracy (NIGD):

We have to move beyond rigid movement/space dichotomies if we want to understand the role of the WSF. The WSF can play and has played a role in facilitating radical social action. One example is the fact that the massive antiwar protests of 15 February 2003 were to a significant extent initiated and organized from within the WSF process. We should use this example more consciously to counter the claims that the WSF is politically useless. We should also use it as a learning experience, to build more effective channels for concrete action without building a traditional movement (of movements)... The WSF should not be turned into a political party or a new International. It should, however, have better mechanisms for exchanging, disseminating and debating strategies of radical transformation. More explicit mechanisms and procedures mean more possibilities for getting things done.

More than any other, this cleavage, however intensely fought among some leading figures in the WSF, does not resonate among the social base of the Forum. The vast majority of the movements and NGOs come to the WSF to exchange experiences, learn about relevant issues and look for possible alliances that may strengthen the struggles in which they are already involved. The contacts made at the WSF may lead them into new struggles or courses of action, but only if they choose to do so.

This cleavage surfaced with some intensity in the WSF 2005 and afterwards in the aftermath of the presentation by some high-profile participants in the WSF of a declaration entitled 'Manifesto of Porto Alegre' (see Box 2.1), to which I now turn.

¹ During the WSF 2003 there were severe tensions within the OC and between the OC and the assembly of the social movements over the fact that, by being held on the last day of the WSF and ending with a final document or declaration, the assembly was allegedly trying to present its declaration to the participants and international media as the final declaration of the WSF.

To manifest or not to manifest?

The idea of drafting a document that would synthesise the major points of agreement among the movements and NGOs participating in the WSF dates back to the second WSF, in 2002. Impressed by the enthusiasm with which so many organisations across the world responded to the call of the WSF and the atmosphere of general consensus on major global issues expressed in so many meetings convened by so many different organisations, some intellectual activists started discussing the idea of putting together the main points of agreement in a document. The document would have the twofold purpose of providing the participants with an overview of the diversity of the WSF and showing the outside world that such diversity was neither chaotic nor devoid of concrete orientations for collective global action. The success of the third WSF (2003) was interpreted as providing further justification for the idea of a document in light of the immense range of topics discussed and the generalised view that the lively debates were not being used to generate concrete proposals for action against neoliberal globalisation. In the WSF held in Mumbai (2004), Bernard Cassen, founder of ATTAC, was particularly insistent on the idea that the growing strength of the WSF demanded that the alternative provided by the WSF to the World Economic Forum of Davos be sharpened and made visible worldwide. If the WEF had been for many years the think tank of hegemonic globalisation and the legitimating amplifier for the Washington Consensus, the WSF should present itself to the world as being the major manifestation of a counter-hegemonic globalisation and the bearer of an alternative global consensus, the Consensus of Porto Alegre. How to accomplish this, having in mind the informal and horizontal structure of the WSF and the terms of the Charter of Principles? The idea of a manifesto of the WSF was ruled out by the charter. The charter, however, did not prevent the participants from drafting manifestos and from presenting them as expressing the political will of the signers. The political weight of the manifesto would depend on the number of participants willing to sign it. The manifesto was finally drafted during the fifth WSF, signed by 19 well-known participants², and presented to the media outside the World Social Territory (the grounds where the WSF was convened) as a document opened to the subscription of all participants in the WSF. The focus of the document was on concrete

proposals, 'twelve proposals for another possible world'.

The document met with strong criticism. Two major types of criticisms can be identified: methodological and substantive. The methodological criticism stated that the manifesto either violated the Charter of Principles or came close to doing so. By presenting their document as the Manifesto of Porto Alegre, the signers induced the media wrongly to take the terms of the document as an authoritative interpretation of the political will of the WSF. The WSF does not provide for any mechanism by means of which such a political will may be determined, for the simple reason that such determination is ruled out by the spirit and the letter of the charter. In other words, the document violated the idea that the WSF is an open space where different political wills can be formulated. As might be expected, Francisco Whitaker was the most vocal critic, minimising the importance of the manifesto by viewing it as one among hundreds (if not thousands) of proposals being presented at the Forum. When the signers responded that that was precisely what they had tried to do (to present as a proposal a document to be signed by whoever agreed with its terms), Whitaker argued that, such being the case, they should not have used such an ambiguously all-encompassing title, the 'Manifesto of Porto Alegre'.

The second, substantive, kind of criticism focused on the content of the document. Two criticisms should be mentioned, both of them emphasising the reductionist view of the 'consensus' presented, which allegedly suppressed the diversity and the pluralism present at the Forum. One of the criticisms, originating in the feminist movements and organisations, stated that the document had been drafted and signed by 18 white men and one African woman. Not surprisingly, it was argued, sexual discrimination was mentioned in only one of the proposals (number 8), among many other forms of discrimination, and there was no trace of a gender perspective in the rest of the document. The other criticism, originating in the radical Leftist groups, alleged that the manifesto was a reformist or neo-reformist document, drafted by a small group of intellectuals (the same old types). Most proposals, even

² *The first signers were Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, Aminata Traoré, Eduardo Galeano, José Saramago, François Houtart, Armand Matellart, Roberto Sávio, Ignácio Ramonet, Ricardo Petrella, Bernard Cassen, Samuel Luis García, Tariq Ali, Frei Betto, Emir Sader, Samir Amin, Atílio Borón, Walden Bello, Immanuel Wallerstein, and the author.*

if correct, were limited in scope, so the argument ran, thus contributing to the illusion that imperialism may be successfully confronted by non-radical measures and struggles.

My guess is that most people did not know about or read the manifesto, and that those few who did found it obvious, neither dangerous nor important

As one of the signers of the document, I would like to respond to these criticisms. Starting with the substantive criticisms, and in a kind of voluntary self-criticism, I fully accept the feminist critique. As for the anti-reformist criticism, I start from the assumption that social revolution is not on the political agenda (for the time being, at least) of short-term or medium-term social transformation. If we bear this in mind, the proposals formulated in the manifesto, both individually and taken together, are very radical indeed. Concerning the methodological criticism, I see a point in Whitaker's stance, since I fully share his idea that the strength of the WSF lies in the rich diversity of the participants and in the celebration of pluralism and horizontality. But I would like to add the following comments. First, the strength of the WSF may become its weakness if more and more groups reach the conclusion that the costs of getting involved in the WSF are too high when compared with the real impact of the WSF in making the world less comfortable for global capitalism. The danger of being prey to factionalism is as real as the danger of being dismissed as irrelevant. The manifesto was aimed at addressing the latter danger, even if, as I admit, it was not carried out in a consistent and correct way. Rather than being dismissed, it should be recovered and carried out with a new and more participatory and democratic methodology. The second comment is that the idea that nobody and no group owns the WSF is our most precious heritage. But it applies both to those who try to write a manifesto that may be taken as binding to all of us, and to those who criticise the initiative on the basis of the seemingly sole authorised and authoritative interpretation of the Charter of Principles. The commitment to horizontality may end up a dogmatism like any other.

The 'incident' of the manifesto highlighted the cleavage between those who conceive of the WSF as a social space and those who conceive of it as the embryo of a global civil society, constituted by a wide range of global or globally linked social actors. But, as I said above, this cleavage was confined to a group of high-profile participants. My guess is that most people did not know about or read the manifesto, and that those few who did find it obvious, neither dangerous nor important.

Conclusion

The WSF is a power space. The opposite claim – that the WSF is a totally open space, with no centre and no hierarchies, and potentially all-inclusive (within the limits set by the Charter of Principles) – seems to be a bit far-fetched. It is true that many of the concrete limits of inclusion are not the responsibility of the organisers. Nonetheless, crucial organisational options are decided by the IS and by the IC, and they condition the types of events that will take place, the themes that will be discussed and the ambit of the discussion. It is, therefore, wise to recognise the existence of power relations and submit them to the same criteria we want to see applied in society at large: transparency in the operation of such relations and their submission to the mechanisms of participatory democracy. Herein lies the new strength of the WSF, a strength that is necessary to confront the new challenges as the WSF moves to ever more efficient ways of making the world less and less comfortable for neoliberal globalisation, that is, for global capitalism as we know it.

Bernard Cassen

Unlike with the four editions held in Porto Alegre, Brazil and the 2004 sessions in Mumbai, India, the World Social Forum (WSF) will not convene in a single annual meeting in 2006. While a sixth annual Forum will be held in Africa in 2007, the WSF International Council unanimously agreed to hold meetings in several countries in 2006. Such gatherings will fit into the broader framework of a 'Polycentric World Social Forum'. The most important one will be held in Caracas, Venezuela, 24–29 January, and the other two will take place in Karachi, Pakistan and Bamako, Mali. The Caracas event will also serve as the second edition of the Social Forum of the Americas.

The dates selected for the Venezuela meeting parallel those of the Davos World Economic Forum (WEF) so as to prevent world leaders from marking the beginning of each year by dominating the media's agenda with the unchallenged expression of their vision for the planet's future. Past experience has shown that the simultaneity of these two events is an important asset. This had been acknowledged by Klaus Schwab, founder and chairman of the WEF who, addressing journalists in Buenos Aires on 21 March 2001 (two months after the first WSF), argued that the World Social Forum had affected the WEF's reputation in a negative way: 'Very smartly, place your name next to another, globally known one, and you become famous'. In other words, Schwab's statement was effectively saying, 'Without Davos, nobody would have ever heard of Porto Alegre'. While this claim is certainly exaggerated, one has to recognise that we have indeed been able to make the most out of the concurrence of these two events.

After the first meeting of the WSF in 2001, it became clear that the city of Porto Alegre alone would not suffice to host, on a yearly basis, the entire resistance movement that is committed to finding alternatives to corporate-led globalisation. During the closing session of the first WSF, which reconfirmed the Rio Grande do Sul State capital as the 2002 host city, it was also agreed that the Forum needed to undergo geographic globalisation. Such expansion did not actually begin until the following year, with the appearance of the

Thematic and Continental (or Regional in some parts of the world) Social Forums, in particular the European Social Forums of Florence (2002), Paris and Saint-Denis (2003) and London (2004). These were also complemented by numerous national and local forums – not mentioned here because the list would be too long.

Heads of multinational companies, bankers and political leaders have the opportunity to meet informally throughout the year at the WEF in Davos, the Trilateral Commission, the European Round Table of Industrialists, the Transatlantic Business Dialogue, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the Bilderberg Group, and many other symposiums organised by US and European foundations. Within these conclaves, political and business leaders discuss the state of neoliberal globalisation and the potential threats against it, as well as the strength of its opponents and ways to contain them. No official reports are published; information and strategies circulate by word of mouth, building very strong personal ties among the parties involved. Echoes of these meetings' proceedings are found in selected journals, in working documents with restricted circulation, and in the accounts of the hand-picked journalists who manage to attend these discrete encounters.

Nothing of the sort existed on the social movements' side. Of course, through their international structures, innumerable campaign activists, as well as religious, academic, humanitarian, NGO and trade-union networks did meet periodically. Nonetheless, experience has shown that these single-issue meetings rarely resulted in concrete global action, precisely because of their very specificity. What was missing was a space where the greatest number of social players, geographically isolated and usually lacking funds, could meet to articulate and exchange their views and their experience of political struggles.

In June 1999, the international gathering organised by ATTAC France (of which I was president at the time)

With thanks to Chiara Jasson for the translation of this chapter.

in Saint-Denis represented the first attempt at creating such space. In my opening remarks, I explained that:

One of this meeting's objectives is to give individual struggles a global visibility, showing their coherence and convergence. Throughout the course of these three days, we are going to analyse, share our respective experiences, and devise plans of action for the forthcoming months and years. Equally importantly, we are going to get to know each other within and among our countries and continents. We are going to build bridges connecting one another.

At the time, I could not anticipate that, out of this original ambition, less than two years later and on a much larger scale, the World Social Forum would come into existence. The WSF represented a forum that would allow for debate, agreements and disagreements, as well as for the gradual building of consensus among all sorts of movements. Such a space was to fulfil the crucial role of defining common strategies.

The World Social Forum was radically innovative in its ability to shift from a 'no'-oriented culture, which had spectacularly manifested itself in Seattle in 1999 and in other subsequent protest demonstrations, to a 'yes' culture implied in the slogan, 'Another World is Possible'. The novelty of WSF lay too in its ability and willingness to find viable alternatives, outlining the boundaries of national, continental and global coalitions. Moreover, it has succeeded in bringing together actors and social movements whose logic and views did not always spontaneously converge. These include trade unions and voluntary organisations, churches, small and medium-sized firms, as well as national or local elected representatives.

According to its first statements and to the reference document known as the Porto Alegre Charter of Principles, adopted in 2001 in order to frame the structure of future forums, the WSF represents both a 'space' and a 'process' rather than an 'entity'. In fact, since Porto Alegre I (January 2001) the WSF has been about facilitating dialogue and exchanges, elaborating proposals and strategies for action, as well as forming coalitions among all social players opposing neoliberal globalisation – such opposition being the sine qua non condition for their participation. It must be noted that participating in the WSF does not necessarily imply a commitment to all or any of these initiatives. They only commit those wishing to get involved.

As underlined by Chico Whitaker in his contribution to this chapter, the WSF does not take a political stance, as such. There is no such thing as a final statement. While there are documents adopted in the course of the WSF, there are no official WSF texts other than those defining the 'rules of the game'.

This is also true for the majority of its continental offspring (such as the European Social Forums) and for its guiding structure, the International Council. This peculiar status still has not been fully understood by numerous observers, who fail to understand why the WSF should end without official statements and proposals. This has led many to accuse us of backing away from our plans when faced with reality. Yet, had they wandered through the WSF's hundreds of workshops and seminars between 2001 and 2005, they might have realised that proposals were certainly not lacking.

It seems to me that the World Social Forum process represents a double historical turning point: first, through the continuing elaboration, at the local, national and global levels, of a growing body of analyses and proposals widely shared by social players committed to finding viable alternatives to neoliberal policies; and second, through the geographic multiplicity of its forces and actors. This is clearly expressed in its choice of a Brazilian city, a city of the South, as its symbolic headquarters.

The question constantly asked by delegates and observers is: what are the main conclusions of these global or European meetings, and what can they lead to in concrete terms?

Another positive aspect of these forums, somewhat underestimated by the vast majority of social movements as well as by the International Secretariat and the International Council (in which the topic was never seriously discussed), is the involvement of elected representatives in this process. The relationship between social movements and the political sphere has been addressed in countless theoretical and practical debates, whose terms vary significantly from one country to another. For my part, I have always thought that excessive distance in talking to political parties and representatives was unnecessary if mutual respect was shown and a few working rules were obeyed.

The Charter of Principles makes clear that 'representen-

tatives of political parties and military organisations are not allowed to take part in the Forum. Nonetheless, political representatives and parliamentarians endorsing the fundamental principles of this Charter may be invited to attend'. Some observers have seen a discrepancy between such principles and the publicised attendance of ministers and political representatives during the previous five World Social Forums. Their presence can be partially explained by the meetings of the Parliamentarians 'Forum and of the Local Authorities Forum, held one or two days before the opening of nearly every World Social Forum.

In these two specialised Forums, deputies, senators and ministers speak in their official capacities but in an informal manner. They are then free to attend WSF seminars and workshops as observers. This has allowed the inclusion of elected and government representatives in the broader WSF movement. Moreover, it has facilitated contact between such politicians, trade unions and NGO activists. For instance, the fact that Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoé and Saint-Denis Mayor Patrick Braouzec were sitting a few tables away from me at the Hotel Plaza São Rafael bar during the 2002 WSF allowed me to obtain their agreement to host jointly the 2003 European Social Forum (ESF).

Another positive development lies in the final statements of the Local Authorities', and Parliamentarians', Forums. These documents signal a clearer involvement of elected political representatives in the struggle against neoliberal globalisation and, in the case of parliamentarians, in support for the Tobin tax as well as other global taxes, opposition to the war in Iraq and to the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) of the World Trade Organization (WTO), among other issues.

The decision not to hold a full-scale WSF annual meeting in 2006 is not only due to the need to allow Africa to prepare itself to host it in 2007. It has also to do with the fact that, even though it has been partly revamped in 2005 at Porto Alegre, notably by taking the demands and priorities of social grassroots movements more into account when drafting the programme, the original format inaugurated in 2001 has somewhat run out of steam. The question constantly asked by delegates and observers is: what are the main conclusions of these global or European meetings, and what can they lead to in concrete terms? Several possible and different indicators can be used to measure the success they have had so far.

- *The number of participants.* The mass presence recorded since the first WSF, culminating in the attendance of 150,000 participants in 2005, has shown that, while numbers are important, they are not necessarily meaningful. Clearly, more and more delegates could attend every year. But so what?
- *The broadening of the WSF's social base and the increasingly wide spectrum of organisations seeking 'a different kind of world'.* From this viewpoint, the number of participants has been an important element in that it has encouraged reluctant organisations (such as trade unions) to make the most of a highly visible forum and to adopt, albeit temporarily, an anti-globalisation stance. However, the involvement of many organisations stops there; it does not extend to further initiatives. Fortunately, the present situation is constantly moving.
- *The incorporation of the host country or continent's social forces in the anti-globalisation movement.* This was one of Porto Alegre's great achievements. Holding the WSF in Brazil has made Latin America a crucial player in the movement against neoliberal globalisation, previously led by European and North American groups. The 2004 Mumbai Forum was a historic event in so far as South (and to a lesser extent East) Asia became the world movement's fourth component.
- *The public projection of proposals elaborated within the WSFs and their injection into national, continental and international politics.* That's where the shoe pinches: for ordinary citizens, the World Social Forums essentially remain a sort of itinerant activists' fair with both positive (such as the internationalist 'all together' feeling) and negative elements. We are at pains to explain what exactly 'came out' of a Forum. Calls from 'social movements' assemblies' held during the Forums cannot fulfil this role, not least because of the disparity between the number of organisations drafting and adopting them and the total number of those taking part in the Forums. Such ratios range, at best, between 1:20 and 1:50. While all this is important, it does not yet result in prospects for change achievable in a foreseeable future.

And exactly what change are we referring to? The anti-globalisation movement states that 'a different world' is possible, but what kind of world? We are faced with a paradox: numerous proposals are being put forth within the Forums, but these officially remain invisible. This has prevented an adequate circulation of information and increased the chance of repetition from one meeting to the next. Hence the frustration of many participants, who expect conclusions in terms of a minimal political programme.

In this respect, the making of a collective 'memory' of the Social Forums (be they local, national, continental or global), as exhaustive and thorough as possible, has become a priority. Such a memory implies the use of different media: books, articles, databases, films and videos, exhibitions, and so on. We need to inform the general public of our discussions and conclusions so as to fuel our struggles and debates. This ongoing endeavour has been updated and coordinated at the international level after the Paris/Saint-Denis ESF, partly thanks to a surplus of funds remaining after this meeting. We can therefore hope that, in the foreseeable future, an operational memory of the World Social Forums will be available.

A second and more sensitive priority is the drafting of clearly legible 'sets' of proposals resulting from the Forums, designed not only for the participating organisations but as a means of mobilising others at the national, continental and global levels. It is clear that neoliberalism functions as a system, and cannot be challenged only by random, single-issue responses. In order to capture the attention of wider audiences and sectors, as well as to neutralise its adversaries who accuse it of 'not proposing' viable alternatives, the WSF movement must put forth sets of coherent measures serving both as a system and as an official public manifesto. In order to succeed in this complex task, two major pitfalls must be avoided: first, that of generalised concepts contained in verbal form in the programmes of governments and parties; and second, that of over-specification, potentially appealing only to the most radical factions of the movement. Here, the objective should be the creation of a new paradigm divergent from the neoliberal one, while leaving enough doors open to respect the diversity of the movement's participants and preserve all prospects for enlargement.

Such 'platforms' would enhance the meaning of the term 'anti-globalisation'. In fact, we would propose a new system, thus laying the foundations of a different

world. Without this, we risk running around in circles and perpetuating the very political impotence that makes our adversaries and some of our self-proclaimed 'friends' happy. In fact, their greatest fear would be that of facing an emancipatory project benefiting from mass support and endorsed at the local or global level.

Activists are no longer satisfied with mere debate. They want to move on to action in order to change the world, with a certain number of shared objectives

This was the situation after the London European Social Forum of October 2004, three months before the 2005 session of the WSF in Porto Alegre. The London ESF had been criticised in so far as its three core objectives – the confrontation of ideas, the elaboration of proposals, and common plans of action – had not been equally achieved. Such confrontations had actually occurred during the preparatory stages of the ESF.

A significant proportion of participants succeeded in shifting the themes of 'war' and 'racism' to the top of the agenda. While these issues were certainly very important, they ended up dominating the meeting at the expense of other topics such as social issues and the future of the European Union. For instance, while all EU Member States were facing the problem of the ratification of the proposed European Constitution, this issue remained marginalised throughout the ESF which failed to provide any new ideas capable of creating a common European 'platform'. The only proposals came from existing networks, in particular that of the European ATTACs, which had been working closely together and for which the London meeting represented one of the many scheduled in their agenda.

In many respects, for these networks, the WSF plays the same role as the ESF, but on a global scale. In the case of ATTAC, which has chapters in about 50 countries, it represents the annual opportunity to bring together members from Chile, France, Quebec, Burkina Faso, Japan and so forth. Throughout the rest of the year, meetings are bilateral, except in Europe, where they occur nearly every six weeks. In the meantime, internet and conference calls ensure that regular contact is maintained.

It can be said that, after five WSFs, three ESFs and several other forums held in Latin America and

elsewhere, we have in mind a comprehensive list of current and potential alliances between the social movements of Europe and the Americas. We have a fairly precise 'map' of forces likely to be 'mobilised'. However, in spite of Mumbai, much remains to be done in Asia, Africa and the Near East. These parts of the world are fertile ground for the anti-globalisation movement. This, among other considerations, justifies the decision to hold forthcoming World Social Forums in or close to these regions.

While not yet universal, the anti-globalisation movement's current maturity provides an additional reason to make the most of its achievements by developing the platforms of proposals mentioned earlier. The Porto Alegre Manifesto proposed at the 2005 WSF represents a first concrete step in this process (see Box 2.1). Chico Whitaker is right to describe this initiative as one of the 353 resulting from the Forum. Its signatories have said it themselves. This manifesto, endorsed by individuals whose commitment to the anti-globalisation movement is undeniable, has generated such a wide array of comments as well as occasional criticism that we are led to believe it is a little different from the other 352 initiatives. In fact, it marks a turning point in the history of the WSF, and its consequences have not yet fully worked themselves out. First, it does not conflict with the Porto Alegre Charter of Principles. Second, it is not an attempt by intellectuals to proclaim themselves 'leaders' of the anti-globalisation movement. None of its signatories has such an ambition, which would not only be laughable but also bound to fail.

Their objective was to provide a first answer to widespread aspirations that, if not taken into account, will progressively empty the WSFs of their most active members. One must be aware that this process has already begun, at both the European and the global levels, where several organisations feel that they are wasting their time and limited financial resources in repetitive discussions. Activists are no longer satisfied with mere debate. They want to move on to action in order to change the world, with a certain number of shared objectives. The body of proposals resulting from past Forums is extensive enough to draft largely consensual platforms and challenge political parties, governments and multilateral organisations. While this first manifesto is not frozen, and remains open to amendments, it does represent a starting point.

It is for this reason that, in my view, the organisers

of future WSFs should take into account the following imperatives:

1. Preserve, in full respect of the Charter, the WSF status as an open process and space.
2. Reinforce the visibility and coherence of the key sector-based proposals. Producing 353 of them, as happened at the 2005 WSF, without setting priorities, may be intellectually appealing but lacks political feasibility at a time when this is exactly what is expected from the Forums.
3. Give top priority to the debates on ongoing world or continental campaigns: Third World debt, tax havens, global taxes, the WTO and GATS, free-trade agreements, US wars, genetically modified organisms, common goods, access to water, and so on. I would tentatively go as far as saying that the Social Forums could be built exclusively on these ongoing campaigns, to which could be added a few others already prepared within ad hoc networks.
4. Within the framework of these Forums, discuss and enrich the platforms of proposals outlining global projects. How? By drawing on campaign proposals and gradually expanding the number of organisations supporting them; the Porto Alegre Manifesto is the first but not the only building block in this construction.
5. Articulate the activities of Social Forums with those of the Local Authorities', Trade Unions', and Parliamentarians' Forums. Until now, these activities have not been coordinated. We can no longer afford the luxury of preserving a wall between elected representatives and social movements if they share the same global objectives of resisting neoliberalism. With due respect for the autonomy of the parties involved, such wide cooperation should become a central objective of the Forums.

Around the world there are millions of citizens wanting radical change. If the Forums are unable to play host not only to discussion and debate but also to the ways and means to put proposals into practice, other structures will replace them. The Forums will run the risk of becoming empty shells, progressively deserted by social actors. Fortunately, we are still able to prevent this development.

Box 2.1: The Porto Alegre Manifesto: twelve proposals for a different, achievable world

Since the first World Social Forum held in Porto Alegre in January 2001, the phenomenon of Social Forums has spread to all continents, and to all levels: national and local. It has created a global sense of citizenship and a worldwide public arena for campaigns. It has permitted the elaboration of political proposals presenting an alternative to the tyranny of neoliberal globalisation driven by financial markets and transnational corporations, and supported by the imperial power of the United States. Through its diversity, and the solidarity between the actors and the social movements which together constitute it, the alternative global movement is now a significant force on a worldwide level.

An abundance of proposals is emerging from these Forums, of which a great many seem to attract strong support from social movements. The signatories of the Porto Alegre Manifesto, who express themselves here in a purely personal capacity and do not claim to speak for the Forum, have identified twelve of these proposals that, together, provide both a strategy and a design for the construction of a different, and achievable, world. Should they be applied, they would at last allow citizens to act together in order to start taking charge of their future.

This minimum set of proposals is subject to the approval of actors and social movements in every country. It will be up to them, on all levels – global, continental, national and local – to engage in the necessary struggles in order for it to become a reality. We hold no illusions about the desire of governments and international institutions to put these proposals willingly into practice, even if, through sheer opportunism, they borrow phrases from them.

I – A different, achievable world must respect every human being's right to life with new economic rules. It is therefore necessary:

1. to cancel Third World debt, which has already been paid several times over, and which constitutes, for the creditor states, banks and financial institutions, the privileged means of placing the greater part of mankind under their control and keeping it poor. This measure must be accompanied by returning the huge sums of money that corrupt leaders have stripped from their people.
2. to introduce global taxes on financial transactions (in particular the Tobin tax on currency speculation), on direct investments abroad, on the consolidated profits of transnational corporations, on the sale of weapons and on activities producing large quantities of greenhouse gases. Added to public aid to development, which must reach 0.7% of the GDP of developed countries, the resources from these taxes should be used to fight against widespread pandemics (such as AIDS) and to ensure that the whole of mankind has access to drinking water, accommodation, energy, healthcare and medicine, education and social services.
3. To dismantle progressively all forms of tax, judicial and financial havens, which are lairs for organised crime, corruption, all kinds of traffic, fraud and tax evasion, and criminal operations by large companies and governments. These tax havens are not only certain states acting outside the remit of international law; they also include legislation in certain developed countries. Initially it would be appropriate to tax heavily the flows of capital entering or leaving these 'havens', as well as the institutions and actors, financial or otherwise, which make such large-scale embezzlement possible.
4. to make imperative in public policy, as much national as international, the right of every inhabitant of this planet to a job, social protection and a pension, with respect for gender equality.
5. – to promote all forms of fair trade by rejecting the free-trade regulations of the World Trade Organization and by creating mechanisms that, in the production of goods and services, foster an upwards harmonisation of social (as written in the International Labour Organization conventions) and environmental norms.
– to exclude education, health, social services and culture from the ambit of the WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). The Convention on cultural diversity, currently under negotiation at UNESCO, must explicitly give precedence to the right to culture, and to public policies in support of culture, over trade law.

6. to guarantee each country's, or grouping of countries', right to food safety and sovereignty through the promotion of small-scale farming. This should lead to the complete suppression of export subsidies on agricultural products, most notably by the United States and the European Union, and the possibility to tax imports in order to prevent dumping practices. Likewise, each country or group of countries must be able to decide independently whether to prohibit the production and importation of genetically modified organisms for alimentary purposes.
7. to prohibit all forms of knowledge and life patenting (of humans and animals as well as plants), and any privatisation of public common goods, water in particular.

II – A different, achievable world must promote 'living together' in peace and justice for all mankind. It is therefore necessary:

8. – to fight, initially through new public policies, against all forms of discrimination, sexism, xenophobia, racism and anti-semitism.
 - to recognise fully political, cultural and economic rights (including the control of their natural resources) of indigenous peoples.
9. – to take urgent measures to put an end to the destruction of the environment, and to the threat of major climate change due to greenhouse gases, mainly the result of the proliferation of transport and of the careless use of non-renewable energy.
 - to demand the implementation of existing agreements, conventions and treaties, even if they are insufficient.
 - to initiate a different kind of development based upon the moderate use of energy and the democratic control of natural resources, in particular drinking water, at a global level.
10. to demand the dismantling of foreign military bases and the removal of all foreign troops, except those with a direct mandate from the UN, starting with Iraq and Palestine.

III – A different, achievable world must promote local and global democracy. It is therefore necessary:

11. – to guarantee through legislation the right to information and the right to inform citizens.
 - to put an end to the concentration of the media within groups owned by communication conglomerates.
 - to guarantee the independence of journalists in relation to shareholders.
 - to favour the non-profit press, notably alternative and community media.

Respecting these rights implies the building of citizens' counterpowers, in particular in the form of voluntary international and national media watch organisations.

12. to reform and further democratise international organisations, making human, economic, social and cultural rights a priority, through the extension of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. This implies the incorporation of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the WTO into the United Nations decision-making mechanisms. In the event of continued violations of international law by the United States, it will be necessary to transfer the United Nations headquarters from New York to another country, preferably in the South.

Porto Alegre, 29 January 2005

Translation: Victoria Roberts

Source: www.mondialisations.org/php/public/art.php?id=16995&lan=EN (consulted 11 July 2005)

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